

Minnesota

# Agriculture

*Voice of Rural Minnesota*



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**February 2026**

*Standing for Agriculture, Working for Farmers.* [www.mfu.org](http://www.mfu.org)





# Farm management analyst offers perspective on federal issues

By Kent Thiesse

Following is some perspective on a few of the key agriculture and energy policy issues that may be under consideration during the next session of Congress, or by executive action from the Trump administration:

• **Tariffs and trade policy** — During the first year of his second term, President Trump imposed additional tariffs on a variety of goods being imported into the United States. The administration later eased up on some of those tariffs, however, the cost of many farm inputs and expenses increased in 2025 as a result of added tariffs. The United States-Mexico-Canada (USMCA) trade agreement negotiated during the first Trump administration is up for renewal in 2026.

• **Renewable fuels and energy** — Many farm organizations are hoping that the Trump administration and Congress will take a stronger stance on further development of the renewable energy industry in the U.S. through implementation of year-round E-15 fuel blends, development of sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) and other incentives for renewable fuels.

• **Farm and rural economy struggles continue** — Profit margins from crop production for many farmers were negative for the third year in a row in 2025, and profit prospects do not appear to be much better for 2026. Crop production input costs and other farm expenses are expected to increase in 2026, while land rental rates are expected to stay at fairly high levels. Farmers have become quite dependent on short-term ad hoc government payments to offset the negative profit margins.

• **Implementation of the One Big Beautiful Act (OBBA)** — The bill contains many provisions that will improve the safety net for many Midwest crop producers. This included enhancements to the reference prices and crop insurance provisions that would normally be addressed in a farm bill. However, the OBBA did not address farm bill titles such as conservation, rural development, ag research or trade promotion.

• **Immigration policies** — Both production agriculture and ag processing rely on immigrant labor to maintain an adequate workforce, so actions by the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency has put some segments of the industry on edge. What is really needed is the development of an immigration policy that both secures the U.S. border and also allows needed immigration to satisfy labor shortages in some segments of the ag industry.

• **Implications of Make America Healthy Again (MAHA)** — U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) Robert F. Kennedy stirred concern with proposals that were in the initial MAHA reports. While many of the recommendations in the report related to the agriculture industry were delayed, many farm and ag industry leaders are wondering what the impacts of MAHA might be in 2026 and beyond.

These are only a few of the potential ag policy issues that could affect farm families and rural businesses in 2026.

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# President's message

## GARY WERTISH, PRESIDENT

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On Dec. 8, President Trump and Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins announced that farmers will receive \$12 billion in Farmer Bridge Assistance Program (FBA) payments to offset trade disruptions and increased production costs.

The \$12 billion is not even a band aid as North Dakota State University and other credible sources are estimating the shortfall for farmers will be \$40 billion to \$60 billion due to lower trade and higher input costs due to the tariffs.

Of the \$12 billion allocated for the FBA payments, up to \$11 billion will go to row crop farmers. Payments will be released by Feb. 28, 2026. The remaining \$1 billion will go to specialty crop and sugar producers. The payments will be administered by the Farm Service Agency.

While the money is welcome, it doesn't change the president's policies that are driving up input costs while taking away market opportunities.

Since taking office last year, Trump has engaged in numerous tariff actions that have created uncertainty in the market and drove away our largest soybean buyer. China, once our largest soybean customer, has invested in South American infrastructure to move grain to port. With these long-term investments, they will be making more purchases from Brazil and Argentina and fewer from the United States.

After Trump imposed tariffs, China stopped buying U.S. soybeans in May 2025. A deal was announced in November 2025 between China and the U.S. where China resumed buying U.S. beans. China committed to purchase 12 million metric tons of U.S. soybeans in the last two months of 2025 and at least 25 million metric tons annually in 2026, 2027 and 2028. In contrast, from 2020 to 2024, China purchased an annual average of 29 million metric tons of soybeans from the United States, according to The Center for Strategic and International Studies. This means the



*During a trade mission to Germany in November, MFU President Gary Wertish met with German Farmers' Association Vice President Susanne Schulze Bockeloh. They also traveled to Switzerland, where they learned about the apprenticeship program at Buhler. In Switzerland, students can choose to go into an apprenticeship program where they are employed in various industries for on-the-job training.*

commitment secured by the administration is for fewer soybeans to be purchased than prior to Trump returning to office in 2025. It also remains to be seen if China will honor the agreement and make the soybean purchases outlined in the agreement. Overall, the proposed agreement leaves farmers in a worst position with China in 2026 than in 2024.

Equally disheartening is the effect Trump's trade tactics have had on the long-term work of U.S. commodity councils. Many farmers pay checkoff dollars on their commodities to build overseas markets for those commodities. The farmers work with trading partners to build relationships and deliver what the trading partner wants. Now, those markets are evaporating because of the Trump administration's tariff policies. If the president loves farmers as he claims to, he wouldn't have the tariff policies that he has put into effect.

Livestock producers haven't been immune from the effects of Trump's trade actions either. In mid-August, Trump raised tariffs on Brazilian beef imports to 50 percent and blocked imports of Mexican feeder cattle because of a screwworm outbreak. Following these two actions, cattle futures

prices jumped from \$210 to \$250 per hundredweight, Farm and Dairy reported. Then in October, Trump canceled the Brazilian beef tariffs and quadrupled Argentine beef imports to the United States. Cattle futures plunged. Also in October, Trump announced a \$40 billion bailout for Argentina.

As I've said many times, farmers would rather make their income from selling their products than getting a government check in the mail. And, while farmers appreciate the money, it's not fair to U.S. taxpayers that only crop farmers get aid when several sectors of the economy have been harmed by the president's trade policies.

## OBBA impacts

The FBA program further disrupts the farm bill coalition that in the past worked together to pass farm bills. The farm bill coalition brought together lawmakers from districts and states that primarily represent growers as well as lawmakers from districts and states that primarily represent consumers. They worked together to pass a farm bill that included funding for both commodity programs and nutrition

*continued on page 14*



# Don't expect big budget changes this legislative session

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Since this is the second year of the biennium—the state's two-year budget cycle—lawmakers are not constitutionally required to come to an agreement on budget or policy changes. The state will continue to operate under the budget agreement approved during the 2025 session.

That said, even numbered years are typically reserved for approving a borrowing package to fund public infrastructure, otherwise known as a bonding bill. This often includes funding for local projects like roads, bridges, water treatment and other expensive building projects that will benefit the public over the long term.

If you're working on a bonding project that's important for your community, please do let our team know. In the past, we've been happy to help track progress, keep members updated on hearings, and otherwise help move a project along.

For example, in 2021, MFU members were working to save a school in Eagle Bend and turn it into sorely needed housing and senior dining. A change was needed in the bonding bill and MFU staff helped ensure members connected with the right lawmakers at the right time. Ultimately, money that was reserved for demolishing

the school was redirected to redeveloping the building.

In past years, lawmakers have approved supplemental budgets for select agencies—essentially, tweaks to the budget approved in the previous year—and made no-cost changes to policy in the second year of the biennium.

That said, there are reasons that significant progress on new funding for agriculture and other priority areas for MFU will be more challenging this year.

First, and as is always the case in the second year of the biennium, lawmakers will be short on time. Session starts a month later this year and lawmakers are constitutionally barred from continuing the regular session beyond Monday, May 18.

Second, the state continues to manage economic uncertainty and faces a projected budget shortfall in the next biennium, though it's important to note that the state's fiscal outlook is looking markedly better than when session closed in 2025.

Budget officials provided a preliminary look into state finances early in December with the release of a new budget forecast. In short, despite challenges nationally, the state's fiscal outlook is improving. Forecasters estimate a \$2.5 billion surplus for the current budget window, through 2027, and a \$3 billion deficit in 2028 and 2029.

This is up from March 2025 when forecasters projected less than a half billion surplus

in the current biennium and a \$6 billion deficit in the next. Officials cited increasing healthcare costs and slow economic growth as key forces driving the shortfall in the out years.

So, despite that \$2.5 billion surplus in the current biennium, lawmakers may continue to seek opportunities to cut program spending. As in the past, MFU will make the case that despite driving a significant part of the state's economy, spending on agriculture makes up less than one half of one percent of the overall state budget.

Healthcare, on the other hand, makes up a significant portion of total state spending. And many federal cuts and program changes have yet to go into effect.

Minnesota may need to shift funding to fill gaps left by the federal government.

On the financial front, there may also be opportunities to get creative. To balance a budget, lawmakers need to cut spending or increase revenue. Last session, the Senate advanced but did not pass a new tax on social media companies and others that buy and sell user data, a provision MFU has new support for in our policy.

Third and finally, this session will prove challenging politically. Despite special elections and as of writing this on Dec. 18, the Minnesota House remains evenly split, and Senate DFLers have a margin of just one vote. Moreover, two of the four

*continued on page 15*



*The Minnesota Department of Commerce partnered with Falk's Seed Farm in Murdock to host a roundtable discussion in December. The department heard directly from farmers, community action leaders and environmental advocates about the challenges they're facing—from high fuel and fertilizer prices to falling crop prices.*



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Community. What does the word community mean to you?

I looked up the word community in the dictionary and found:

- People with common interests living in a particular area.
- A state or feeling of caring about and wanting to interact with others in a group.

To me, community is something greater than myself – it is the people that I choose to hang out with that have similar interests, like my MFU community.

# Ideas to start building a greater Farmers Union community

At its heart, community is connection — something many of us are lacking these days. At a time when things feel more polarized than ever and loneliness has been declared a health epidemic, small gestures of connection matter. Building community not only helps us feel better but also improves our health and sense of belonging — all while fostering social ties that could provide a vital support system in times of need.

To start building community in a way that matters to you, consider taking on one or more of these ideas:

- Volunteer your talents
- Read a book to students at school or the library, bonus points for an agricultural-based book

- Share your time and talents at the county fair
- Engage in community gardening or the University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardeners
- Coordinate a community event. This could be anything from organizing a Rural Health Fair like the Dodge and Olmsted units, to giving away coffee at the Swift County Fair like the Swift County unit.

The sky is the limit. We have a great MFU community. Make sure to invite others in to share and grow the community we've built.

## Welcome new members

Welcome to the new members who joined MFU in November. We look forward to getting to know you and thank you for your membership. We encourage experienced members to invite new members to events in your area. Working together we make a stronger Farmers Union.

**Carter Gjerve, Under Wood Construction, Otter Tail County**

**Heather Keeler, Clay County**

**Cliff Martin and Lenny Cane, Feed the People – Worker Cooperative Farm, Rice County**

**Emily and Dallas Miner, Sherburne County**

**Tonia Poirier, Hennepin-Ramey County**

**Shea-Lynn Ramthun and Luc Ramthun, Flying J Farm, Goodhue County**

**Tobin Tyler and Davis Bonk, Toad Hill Farm, Swift County**

## Member photos



Members of the Glencoe-Silver Lake High School FFA Ag Issues team stopped by the MFU office on Dec. 8 to share their presentation in preparation for their competition at the FFA Winter Leadership Summit in St. Cloud, where they placed second. The Glencoe-Silver Lake FFA Chapter was named the 2025 National Model of Excellence winner at the National FFA Convention.

Share your photos with [janet@mfu.org](mailto:janet@mfu.org) for inclusion in a future issue of Minnesota Agriculture.



**JUSTIN STOFFERAHN,  
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For policymakers looking to address concerns over affordability and the rising cost of living, addressing consolidation and anticompetitive behavior is imperative. Recent evidence has built an even firmer case for the role unfair pricing tactics are playing in driving up costs for consumers and MFU is working to educate the public on those issues.

In December a judge ordered that the Federal Trade Commission had to unseal an antitrust complaint it had brought against PepsiCo under former Chair Lina Khan that was later dismissed under current Chair Andrew Ferguson. The unsealed complaint is an extraordinary look at how powerful retailers and food manufacturers work together to raise grocery prices.

For the past decade, according to the complaint, Walmart has extracted promotional discounts and allowances from Pepsi for soft drinks not available to its competitors. Pepsi in exchange has received prominent advertising and in-store placement of its products from Walmart.

Most explosive though is that Pepsi acted as Walmart's retail price cop, monitoring prices at competing retailers. When Walmart's competitors got too close in price, Pepsi would act to raise those prices by limiting allowances or raising wholesale costs. As the FTC wrote in the complaint, "Rather than simply working with Walmart to reduce prices, Pepsi's actions have had the effect of raising prices for customers of competing retailers."

This behavior is referred to in antitrust circles as price discrimination, or the practice of charging retailers different prices for the same goods. That practice is generally prohibited by the Robinson-Patman Act, a federal antitrust law meant to protect

# Corporations increasingly turn to anticompetitive behavior and AI to raise prices

small businesses that has not been well enforced for the past several decades.

While the FTC's case focused on soft drinks, there is ample evidence that price discrimination is widespread across the grocery industry. A study in November by the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta found retail consolidation is a driver of food inflation. In 2024, the United States Department of Agriculture published a report on meat merchandising that details

These surveillance pricing schemes are just one of the ways data and AI are being used to drive up costs. Increasingly firms are turning to third-party analytics companies to help them passively collude to raise prices. Examples of this behavior can be found in the rental, meat, sugar, potato and pharmaceutical industries and are often referred to as algorithmic price fixing.

## Webinar offers tips for action

These tactics not only raise costs but undermine small businesses and drive consolidation throughout the food system, which ultimately squeezes farmers. That is why MFU is taking the lead on helping legislators understand the important role Minnesota can play in addressing these practices. While reviving Robinson-Patman enforcement or updating federal antitrust laws would be ideal, Minnesota does not have to wait for the federal government to act.

That is why in December MFU held a webinar on unfair pricing practices that covered a range of anticompetitive tactics including price discrimination, price gouging, price fixing and surveillance pricing. The webinar featured a broad lineup of experts including Fordham Law School Professor Zephyr Teachout and staff from MFU partners like the American Economic Liberties Project, Institute for Local Self Reliance, National Grocers Association and Consumer Reports.

The webinar offers explanations of these various tactics and then delves into legislative approaches to addressing them. The webinar is not only a resource for legislators, but anyone concerned about high costs looking for ways the state can help relieve the squeeze on our pocketbooks.

The webinar was recorded and can be found on MFU's YouTube channel:  
[youtube.com/@minnesotafarmersunion19](https://youtube.com/@minnesotafarmersunion19)



*Fordham Law Professor Zephyr Teachout spoke at the 2024 MFU State Convention and was a featured speaker on a MFU-hosted webinar exploring unfair pricing practices.*

complicated schemes of rebates, fees and other arrangements in the meat industry that benefit the largest industry players and raise prices.

Price discrimination is not the only tactic driving up prices at the grocery store. Consumer Reports, the Groundwork Collaborative and More Perfect Union recently released an investigation into Instacart, the online grocery delivery service. What they found were price variances of more than 20 percent, lending some evidence to a growing concern that companies will be able to use surveillance methods and artificial intelligence to raise costs on consumers.

# Global Center Meats holds grand opening in Lismore



By Elizabeth Hines

Collaboration and community were on full display as the former Lee's Locker in Lismore officially reopened as Global Center Meats on Dec. 13. The business, purchased by Manuela Alejandra Pinto Jacobo from previous owners Lee and Shanelle Henning on Nov. 14, marks a new chapter for local meat processing and rural entrepreneurship.

"This is an exciting new chapter for me and the locker," Alejandra said. "We look forward to meeting the community and sharing our vision for the plant as we continue to provide local producers and consumers with the same quality services they've come to expect."

The grand opening on Dec. 13 drew a local crowd, as well as state leaders including Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen and Sen. Bill Weber. Both praised the dedication of Alejandra and Lee, whose cooperation ensured the business remained a vital part of Lismore. Their efforts were recognized as a shining example of commitment to sustaining essential local services that serve rural economies.

"I congratulate you and I wish you well, this is not an easy business . . . there's still a lot of hard physical labor in running a locker plant and I'm certainly happy to see this one continue on and wish you all the best," Weber said.

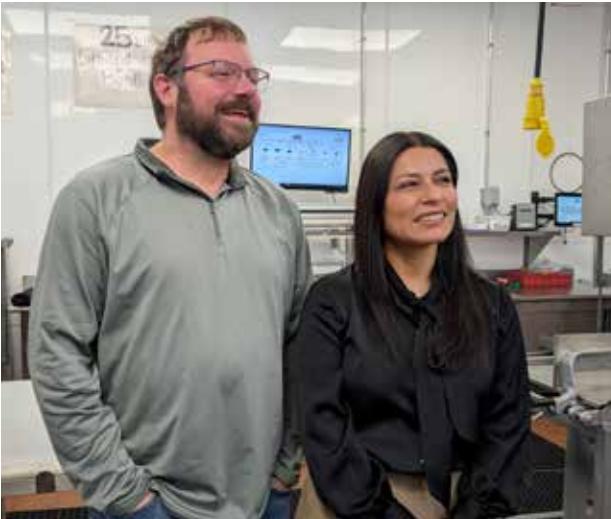
This successful transition was made possible by a network of regional and statewide support. Organizations such as the University of Minnesota Extension Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, the Bottleneck Project (supported by Minnesota Farmers Union), and the Latino Economic Development Center, played crucial roles in facilitating the sale, providing

guiding the transition. Special recognition was given to Bridget Henning, who has served the business for two generations and will continue to mentor Alejandra, ensuring a smooth handover and continuity of expertise.

Minnesota Farmers Union Executive Committee member Ted Winter—a local farmer and former member of the Minnesota House Representatives—spoke ardently about the importance of the meat locker for area farmers. Winter lauded Alejandra

the collaborative spirit that brought this vision to life and the importance of the work being conducted through the Bottleneck Project.

"Supporting entrepreneurs like Alejandra keeps critical processing capacity in Minnesota's rural communities," Sobocinski said. "We're excited to see Global Center Meats keep this facility going strong and proud to help connect them with the resources to grow."



*Lee Henning and Manuela Alejandra Pinto Jacobo at the grand opening of Global Center Meats in Lismore. Photo above right: Alejandra, center, talks with Minnesota Agriculture Commissioner Thom Petersen, left, and Paul Sobocinski of the MFU Meat Processing Bottleneck Project, right.*

for joining a proud tradition of successful ownership transitions, emphasizing that this project serves as a model for agricultural and small business succession across Minnesota.

The event also highlighted the leadership of the Bottleneck Project, with lifelong Farmers Union member Paul Sobocinski and colleagues Julio Cesar Tena Soria and Ryan Solberg in attendance, underscoring

A ribbon-cutting ceremony marked the official start of a new era as Alejandra split the ribbon with her best knife. Alejandra and her team will continue offering the meat processing services of Lee's Locker, with plans for future expansion. The transition was further supported by a Meat Processing Train and Retain Grant from the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, secured with the help of the Minnesota Farmers Union Meat Processing Bottleneck Project and the Latino Economic Development Center, ensuring workforce development and long-term sustainability.

"Helping entrepreneurs secure support they need is central to our mission," said Alma Flores, Executive Director for Latino Economic Development Center (LEDC). "Train and Retain grant funds will create jobs, expand meat processing capacity and strengthen rural economies."

"When processors succeed, entire communities benefit," said Commissioner Petersen. "This transition is great news for producers in Nobles County, and we're glad to be here to assist and celebrate this milestone."

# Experimenting with Kernza fits with couple's goal of protecting water quality

By Janet Kubat Willette

ZUMBRO FALLS, Minn. – Reed and Denise Duncan are building their farm and ranch with a focus toward protecting water quality, keeping their soil in place and raising high-quality cattle and hogs.

Reed grew up just down the road and Denise seven miles away; both are the children of dairy farmers.

"Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to farm," Reed said. He bought their Wabasha County property from his grandfather in 1999. They built a house in 2005 and replaced the barn after a tornado in 2017. Reed designed the barn for storage in the middle with pens along one side for birthing and an open lean-to on the other side for cattle to come in to get out of the wind. It resembles Montana horse barns, Denise said, with the taller roof in the middle of the building and the lower roofs on the two sides.

They raise Black Angus cattle and Idaho pasture pigs in addition to egg-laying chickens. Their diverse crop rotation includes Kernza, corn, hay, oats, wheat and multi-species cover crops. They manage about 150 acres, with includes tillable land, pasture and woods.

"I like being able to grow our own food," Denise said. "I want everything we eat to come from here."

They recently added plum trees and serviceberry bushes as part of their Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contract. The trees went in the windbreak they added as part of the five-year contract. They receive CSP contract payments to make conservation improvements to their operation, including adding the multi-species cover crops and Kernza.

Reed plants the cover crops into the corn when the corn is V4 or V5 stage, this is the fourth or fifth leaf collar. This year, the multi-species package approved by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service included buckwheat, crimson clover, turnips and annual rye. He plants 90-day



*Denise and Reed Duncan in their pasture on a chilly December day. The couple raise cattle, hogs, chickens and crops.*

corn to give the cover crops a larger window to grow in the fall. This is his third year of planting and growing cover crops. The first year was a drought and the plants didn't grow – except for a softball-sized turnip or radish that must have been getting dew drops from corn leaves and was large enough to plug the chopper while he was chopping the corn. The cover crops have grown well the past two years.

They have 18 acres of organic Kernza, which is the grain produced from intermediate wheatgrass. It is a perennial cousin of wheat, according to The Land Institute. It's been challenging to find a market for the grain, but the Duncans use Kernza for seed, grazing and forage and it stays in the ground year-round for multiple years, providing living roots in the soil to improve soil health and keep soil in its place. They graze it heavy in the spring and again in the fall, providing forage for their livestock. They also harvest it for bedding and hay; the grain seed is a plus, Reed said. They have sold 26 pounds so far of the 1,250 pounds they delivered to Stengel Seed and Grain in Milbank, S.D. They have an additional 4,700 pounds of new crop Kernza being cleaned at Stengel now. They've

heard demand is growing because General Mills is quadrupling its use of the grain by adding 1 percent Kernza into its Cascadian Farm cereals of Honey Oat Crunch, Honey Oat Crunch with Almonds, Raisin Bran and Hearty Morning Fiber.

Reed tilled 10 acres of Kernza under this summer and planted clover on those acres this fall. He plans to plant those acres back into a new variety of Kernza with a bigger seedhead. The first variety Reed planted was Minnesota Clearwater; the variety he hopes to plant is Itasca. He sows the grain with a 1950s John Deere grain drill. Kernza planted after Sept. 1 can be harvested in mid-August of the following year. If spring planted, seed can't be harvested in the first year.

Harvesting Kernza for grain is a challenge. Reed swaths the grain into a windrow. The kernza needs to dry for a few days. He then uses a combine with a small grain pick-up head to harvest the grain. Fellow Wabasha County Farmers Union member Al Jostock has been a great help. He harvested the Kernza for the Duncans the first year because they did not have a combine. They were able to purchase a combine for this past harvest. Al helped adjust the new combine to minimize grain loss.

The harvested Kernza grain resembles grass seed and there are Kernza seeds inside the pod, which are released upon cleaning. They put the grain in tote bags and this year harvested 4,700 pounds from 18 acres.

"It's been a stressful, but fun, experience," Reed said of experimenting with Kernza, planting cover crops and rotationally grazing his livestock. "I like the new challenges."

New this year, they planted 2.5 acres of organic Turkey Red Winter Wheat. Denise plans to grind her own flour from the wheat and in the future they may label and sell their own. At some point, they may add a dairy cow to their operation to have fresh milk.



The Duncans raise Idaho Pasture Pigs, which are suited to being outdoors. Reed feeds the piglets a grain mixture and hay while doing evening chores. The piglets go into the A-frame shelter to get out of the wind.

Now, they have 25 beef cows and they are focused on building their Registered Angus herd. At one time, they had a cross-bred herd of 40 cows, which started with two crossbred orphan calves they got from Denise's parents. They sell their calves as feeders.

They have three IPP sows, one boar and 20 baby pigs. The hogs are a cross of Kune Kune, Old Berkshire and Duroc. The pork has a sweeter taste, is highly marbled and red. The hogs are bred to be pastured and outdoors.

The couple have participated in the Farmers Union Enterprises Leadership (FUEL) program and attended the National

Farmers Union Convention (NFU) Fall Fly-in when in that program. They also attended the NFU Convention in Colorado while in FUEL. They've been to the state convention for five years and Denise has served on the state policy committee. She is secretary/treasurer of the Wabasha County unit and Reed is vice president.

They learned about Kernza from Farmers Union, met people from different states through FUEL and discovered the process of advocacy and trying to make things better on the farm.

The couple are also active on their township board; Reed is a Hyde Park Township Supervisor and Denise is the deputy clerk.

Reed has been home on the farm since April, picking up jobs here and there helping the neighbors. Denise is the plant administrator of International Ingredient Corporation in nearby Oak Center. The plant converts cheese not fit for human consumption and bacon grease into pet food flavoring. Their two children are also involved in agriculture. Steven, who earned his CDL in high school, works for an Elgin farmer and Shanae, who is in high school, milks cows for a neighbor. She plans to major in dairy science at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls next year.

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# Farmers Union members honored for their conservation contributions

Several Minnesota Farmers Union members were honored at the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts annual convention in December

## Supervisor of the Year

Tom Schulz of Wadena Soil & Water Conservation District was chosen as this year's SWCD Supervisor of the Year.

Schulz represents the MASWCD mission by stating, "As a landowner, you're receiving expert-level technical assistance on any project when you walk through the door of any SWCD. That personal interaction, along with an interest in wanting what is best for your land, is the kind of 'boots on the ground' aid that is provided to everyone who works with us."

Schulz has brought exceptional leadership skills and talents to the local, area, and state levels and has served on the Board

Tom Schulz of Wadena County was named the MASWCD Supervisor of the Year.

of Water and Soil Resources representing SWCDs. His skills in finance have been an asset to his SWCD. He uses his role as an elected official to help formulate and advance policies that seek to enhance and improve the ability of SWCDs to work on resource concerns that matter to their constituents.

Schulz said that we often stand on the shoulders of those who go before us, and



the wisdom and institutional knowledge we gain from them can be so valuable. He was chosen for the award for the wisdom and institutional knowledge he has and continues to provide to Minnesota's SWCDs.

## Outstanding Conservationist – Chisago County

Pleasant Valley Orchard—owned and operated by husband and wife Jim Birkholz and Judy Erickson, along with their son Sam Birkholz—is the 2025 Outstanding Conservationist for Chisago County. This honor recognizes the family's decades-long dedication to conservation, community leadership, and sustainable farming practices that protect the St. Croix River and celebrate Minnesota's agricultural heritage.

Located on 71 acres near Shafer, Pleasant Valley Orchard began in 1990 and has since grown into one of Minnesota's most beloved fall destinations. Aside from providing U-pick produce opportunities, baked goods, hayrides, family activities and hard cider, the family has also consistently prioritized environmental stewardship on their farm.

Working closely with the Chisago SWCD over the years, the family has restored six drained wetlands, planted native prairie and pollinator habitat, added windbreaks and contour farming strips, established



Pleasant Valley Orchard is the 2025 Outstanding Conservationist for Chisago County.

permanent vegetative buffers around all waterways, implemented integrated pest management, and protected soils year-round with permanent vegetation and cover crops. They also use efficient drip irrigation and are a Minnesota Ag Water Quality Certified farm.

Jim brings decades of conservation leadership as a former Chisago SWCD supervisor and board chair, while Judy contributes

deep experience in environmental policy and community outreach. Sam manages daily operations and serves on the Minnesota Apple Growers Association board, carrying the farm's stewardship legacy forward.

Together, the family has built more than a thriving orchard – they've built a model of conservation-minded agriculture.

## Teacher of the Year

Christa Williamson has been selected as the statewide recipient of the MASWCD Teacher Award. Each year the MASWCD selects an outstanding teacher who actively engages students in the betterment of natural resources in partnership with local Soil and Water Conservation Districts. Williamson was nominated by the Swift County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD).

For more than two decades, Williamson has transformed agricultural education at the Kerkhoven-Murdock-Sunburg School District into a vibrant, hands-on program deeply rooted in soil, water, and conservation. When she joined KMS in 2004, the agriculture program was small and part-time, serving only a handful of students. Within a year, enrollment surged to nearly 100 students, and by integrating science standards with real-world agriculture, she established a full-time program that now serves more than 270 student enrollments annually.



Christa Williamson

Originally a forestry major at the University of Minnesota, Williamson discovered her passion for connecting natural resources, conservation, and agriculture in ways that engage and inspire students. She has embedded conservation principles in all aspects of her curriculum, including soils, water quality, climate adaptation, wildlife management,

and public land stewardship. Over the past four years, she and her teaching partner, Tori Barka, have intentionally integrated climate change and soil health across all courses, teaching students how food systems adapt to environmental challenges.

Her teaching extends beyond the classroom. Williamson partners closely with Swift and Kandiyohi Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), using their resources for student projects and FFA competitions. She recently served on an advisory board for Healthy Roots and Clean Boots, a major soil health event in Swift County, helping design interactive

conservation activities for more than 200 participants in collaboration with 4-H and KMS students. These partnerships provide students with hands-on opportunities to engage with conservation practices in real-world settings.

Williamson's curriculum emphasizes experiential learning. Students conduct water testing for clarity, oxygen, nitrogen, and phosphorus, and perform soil analysis, building soil profiles, determining texture, and assessing land classification. She has led students through projects on cover crops, conservation tillage, wildlife management, and public land use. Her approach ensures that conservation is not just a topic but a guiding principle for all her students.

Williamson has coached FFA Agronomy and Soils Career Development Event teams, with state-level soil teams placing in the top 10 consistently over recent years. Her teaching, mentorship, and partnerships have created a legacy of conservation-minded leaders who carry her lessons into the broader community.

In all aspects of her work, Williamson exemplifies the values of the MASWCD Teacher of the Year Award: dedication, innovation, and a deep passion for stewardship of Minnesota's natural resources.

## Outstanding Conservationist – Wabasha County

The Jostocks run about 200 acres near Hammond. They raise beef cattle and hogs and grow corn, soybeans, small grains and alfalfa using a reduced, no-tillage system. They also plant cover crops after their row crops. Both the no-till practice and the cover crops help to keep any threat of erosion at bay.

Alan has a passion for improving the land with conservation always in the back of his mind. His father, Edwin, and before that his grandfather, Robert, began making conservation improvements on the farm over the decades. Edwin and Robert worked with the Wabasha Conservation Office to install contour farming and strips on their farm, most still remain with alternating strips of hay or small grains.

The district recognizes a pattern of innovation that started with Robert and Edwin



Alan and Betsy Jostock

that is now continued and elevated with the newly married Alan and Betsy. The Jostocks made the transition from a dairy cow herd to a beef herd in 2015 but have always had hogs. Over the last 40 years they have been direct marketing their beef and pork to consumers via the Rolling J Farm of Rochester. They raise their hogs following sustainable practices contracted

through Niman Ranch, where animals are humanely raised, not fed animal byproducts, and no hormones or antibiotics are used.

Alan has increased soil health practices over the last eight years and the soil health of the land has improved with his attention. An example of this can be seen in his transition to no-till. He would see a need for improvement, such as increased down-pressure on his planter and work through the challenge by making equipment modifications that fit their operation. He is now practicing no-till across their entire rotation. For cropland conservation practices, you can't do much more than this.

Besides farming, the whole family is also active in community life with local groups and organizations.

# Apply for Beginning Farmer Tax Credit

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture's (MDA) Rural Finance Authority (RFA) is accepting applications for the 2026 Beginning Farmer Tax Credit. This is an annual program available to landowners or asset owners who rent or sell farmland, equipment, livestock and other agricultural assets to beginning farmers.

There is \$4 million available for the program. The credits are funded in a first-come, first-served manner, so applicants are encouraged to apply early. The application period opened Jan. 1 and last year funds were exhausted by the end of January.

Both asset owners and beginning farmers must submit applications with lease and/or sale documents to be eligible for funding and to hold their place in line. They may apply before sales close with a valid purchase agreement, if needed.

Qualifying asset owners can include individuals, trusts or qualified pass-through entities renting or selling land, livestock, facilities, buildings or machinery used for farming in Minnesota to a beginning farmer. Parents, grandparents and siblings are eligible for the tax credit if they sell farmland to a direct family member.

Asset owners can claim credits in one of the following categories in a given tax year for each beginning farmer they lease/sell to:

	Tax Credit Amount	Maximum Tax Credit	Application Due Date
Cash Rentals	10 percent of annual rental income	\$7,000	July 17, 2026
Share Rentals	15 percent of annual rental income	\$10,000	July 17, 2026
Sales	8% of sale price (12 percent if the buyer is a Limited Land Access Farmer)	\$50,000	Nov. 1, 2026
Beginning Farmer Farm Business Management Tuition Reimbursement	Equal to tuition paid out of pocket	\$1,500 for 3 years	Nov. 1, 2026

However, this does not apply to leases or non-land sales.

A beginning farmer is defined as a Minnesota resident with the desire to start farming or who began farming within the past 10 years. They must provide positive projected earnings statements, have a net worth less than \$1,042,000 and enroll in or have completed an approved Farm Business Management (FBM) program.

Beginning farmers are also eligible for a nonrefundable Minnesota tax credit equal to the amount paid for FBM tuition, up

to a maximum of \$1,500. This tax credit is available for up to three years.

New for 2026: "Limited Land Access Farmer" replaces "Emerging Farmer" in the program. To qualify for the 12 percent rate for a sale, the Limited Land Access Farmer must meet all the following:

- Does not own any farmland.
- Does not rent land from a relative.
- Does not have a lease term greater than three years.

*Source: Minnesota Department of Agriculture*

## Register for MFU Lobby Day

There's still time to register for MFU's Lobby Day on March 3. Lobby Day is an invaluable day of action at the Capitol. Your voice helps ensure legislators stay responsive to the needs of Minnesota's family farmers and rural communities. Visit [bit.ly/MFULobby26](http://bit.ly/MFULobby26) to register by Feb. 23.

The event begins at the MFU State Office, 305 Roselawn Ave. E, St. Paul. Doors open at 9 a.m., with programming starting at 10 a.m.

From there, members will proceed to the Capitol Complex for meetings with individual

lawmakers and other elected officials. Staff will be stationed in specific spots at the Capitol for you to check in if you need assistance.

There will be an afternoon debrief on the Capitol Complex before going to Farmers Kitchen + Bar, 750 S 2nd St., Suite 100, Minneapolis, for a free evening reception. The reception is an opportunity to meet with lawmakers in a less structured environment while meeting other Farmers Union members.

Different from past years, but similar to last year, MFU will not have a room at the Capitol all day because of construction at the complex. Please plan to bring all your materials with you throughout the day.



*MFU members visited with Gov. Tim Walz during a previous Lobby Day.*

Contact Stu Lourey at **320-232-3047** or [stu@mfu.org](mailto:stu@mfu.org) or Lisa Holm at **763-607-4570** or [lisa@mfu.org](mailto:lisa@mfu.org) with any questions, comments or concerns.

# Farmer Bridge Assistance payments expected to be released this month



The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced in December that it would be making \$12 billion available for farmers who have suffered losses after months of high input costs and low crop prices.

Farmers who qualify for the Farmer Bridge Assistance (FBA) Program can expect payments to be released by Feb. 28.

In response to the announcement, National Farmers Union President Rob Larew shared the following:

"We appreciate the administration's decision to deliver economic assistance to family farmers and ranchers at a time of serious stress...Short-term payments, while important, are only a first step. What we truly need are long-term structural fixes that restore viability and stability to family farms and ranches for generations to come."

Of the \$12 billion provided, up to \$11 billion will be used for the FBA Program, which provides broad relief to United States row crop farmers who produce barley, chickpeas, corn, cotton, lentils, oats, peanuts, peas, rice, sorghum, soybeans, wheat, canola, crambe, flax, mustard, rapeseed, safflower, sesame and sunflower. The remaining \$1 billion of the \$12 billion in bridge payments will be reserved for commodities not covered in the FBA Program such as specialty crops and sugar, for example.

## IFU President testifies

Iowa Farmers Union President Aaron Lehman testified before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee in December, discussing the impact of rising health costs on farm families.

"It is hugely important that Iowa farmers and rural residents reach out immediately to our members of Congress," Lehman said. "Too many in Washington live in a bubble.

But in reality, the anticipated health care cost increases will cave in the budgets of farm families, and the damage will reverberate throughout our rural communities. We need to demand action now to extend support to keep health care prices affordable for ordinary Iowans."

## CCOC coming to Minnesota

NFU's College Conference on Cooperatives (CCOC) is Feb. 12-15 in the Twin Cities. CCOC is the premier cooperative education event, bringing together students and young adults from across the country for cooperative education sessions and co-op tours. Interactive workshops allow participants to collaboratively work through problems that co-op boards often face, and a day of co-op tours offers real-world examples of the unique realities of co-ops.

Learn more at <https://nfu.org/events-programs/college-conference-on-cooperatives/>.

## Register for the NFU Convention

Join family farmers and ranchers from across the country in New Orleans for three days of meaningful fellowship, thoughtful policy conversations and inspiring speakers.

There were plenty of challenges in 2025: a new administration, new policy landscape, trade disruptions, rising costs and economic uncertainty. This year's NFU Convention is our time to find strength through connection and prepare for another year of fighting for family agriculture – as we've done for more than 120 years.

Learn more at <https://nfu.org/events-programs/2026-convention/>.

## Time to reinstate COOL

Do you want to know where your food comes from? Do you want to be able to choose American beef at the grocery

store? Join us in telling Congress it's time to reinstate mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL).

American consumers deserve honest and transparent labels so they can make informed food choices at the grocery store, and they deserve the right to choose USA beef. Likewise, U.S. cattle producers deserve a fair chance to compete for this preference.

Just a handful of multinational corporations control the vast majority of the beef market and take advantage of their power. They can import beef, repackage it, and sell it as if it is USA beef. This is unfair to consumers and to family farmers working hard to raise high-quality beef, and it's time to restore truth and fairness in our food system.

Your voice on this is important, and we need your help to get this done. There is legislation before Congress to reinstate mandatory COOL for beef:

- S.421 – American Beef Labeling Act.
- H.R.5818 – Country of Origin Labeling Enforcement Act.

Call your congressperson or senator now and tell them to reinstate mandatory COOL. We need fair, transparent and competitive markets that work for farmers, ranchers and consumers.

**YOU  
MATTER. TALK TO US.**



No concern is too small

Minnesota Farm & Rural Helpline



833-600-2670



Text **farmstress** to **898211**

# President's message

*continued from page 3*

programs. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA) cuts \$187 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) through 2034 - the largest cut in history to nutrition programs, according to the Harvard School of Public Health. Meanwhile, the bill adds \$47.4 billion to commodity program spending over 10 years, according to the Food and Agricultural Research Policy Institute (FAPRI) at the University of Missouri.

The OBBBA, the administration's key reconciliation and policy package signed into law on July 4, 2025, makes several changes that will have far-reaching implications. The policy changes are staggered and take effect over years.

The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget (CRFB) estimates the OBBBA will increase the nation's debt by nearly \$3 trillion by 2034, increase the deficit to 7 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2026, and double interest costs between 2024 and 2034 to \$1.8 trillion or 4.2 percent of GDP. The bill relies on budget gimmicks to mask its impact, the committee said. The CRFB is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization that works to educate the public on issues with significant fiscal policy impact.

## Health care

As this issue went to press, Congress had failed to pass an extension of the Affordable Care Act enhanced premium tax credits that reduced health care premiums for 22 million Americans. The tax credits were a sticking point in the 43-day government shutdown. Republicans were successful in getting the government back up and running after promising to hold a vote in the Senate on the expiring subsidies. Four Republicans joined all the Senate Democrats to extend the premium tax credits by three years, but the measure failed to gain the 60 votes needed to pass, according to Health Affairs. In the House, four Republicans signed a "discharge petition" on Dec. 17, giving Democrats the 218 votes needed to force a vote on the three-year extension of the tax credits. If the tax credit extension is allowed to expire, health care insurance costs are projected to double, according to NBC News.

American Medical Association (AMA) Board Chair David Aizuss said the OBBBA will reduce funding for federal health programs and restrict access to health coverage. He cites projections from the Congressional Budget Office that 10 million people could lose health care coverage by 2034.

In addition, the American Hospital Association says the OBBBA will result in a \$50.4 billion reduction in federal Medicaid spending on rural hospitals over 10 years. Rural hospitals are already struggling, with 48 percent operating at a loss in 2023, according to the hospital association.

While hospitals are struggling, so are patients. Rising health care costs are straining budgets across the board for farmers, small business owners and families. Health care cuts in the OBBBA will shift more costs from the federal government to state and county taxpayers, raising property taxes.

More than 40 percent of U.S. adults are already struggling to pay for health care. KFF, the nation's leading health policy organization, reported in December 2025 that 44 percent of U.S. adults say it is difficult for them to afford their health care costs.

Further, the cost of care can lead to some adults skipping or delaying seeking medical care, with 36 percent of adults reporting they have skipped or postponed getting needed health care in the past 12 months because of the cost. Three-quarters of uninsured adults say they have skipped or postponed getting the health care they needed due to cost.

And skipping needed care had ramifications, with 18 percent of adults reporting that their health got worse because they skipped or delayed getting care.

The KFF poll found that the cost of health care services and unexpected medical bills are a leading cause of stress, with more than 60 percent of respondents saying they are at least somewhat worried about affording the cost of health care services or unexpected medical bills.

This concern about health care was highlighted by MFU members who gathered in November for the state convention. Health care was the topic of one of the special orders of business passed by members. The special orders reflect issues that members highlighted for urgent action.

The MFU special order on health care says that getting care when a person is sick or

injured is central to basic human dignity and should not depend upon a person's zip code, employment status or ability to pay. MFU has long maintained that a health care system that guarantees care for every person would be simpler, cheaper and more dignified and lead to better outcomes for all.

MFU members call upon lawmakers to reverse the healthcare cuts and renew their work to lower costs, improve access and ensure that everyone can get the care they need. MFU supports implementing a public option that allows farmers and others to buy into the state's Minnesota-Care program; structuring programs to create a path toward universal, single-payer healthcare; taking steps to cap costs for those with insurance; opposing the privatization of Medicare, and addressing forces like pharmacy benefit managers and private equity that drive consolidation, reduce access and increase costs. In addition, MFU members call for investment in Emergency Medical Services to ensure adequate response times across the state.

The other special orders passed by members call for an end to the trade war, responding to the crisis in farm country, investing in the next generation of farmers and restoring funding for programs that fight hunger.

As this issue went to press, another federal government funding cliff is looming on Jan. 30. The shutdown that ended on Nov. 12, following the longest U.S. government shutdown in history, extended funding until Jan. 30 for most agencies. Agriculture funding, however, is extended through Sept. 30, 2026, along with another extension of 2018 farm bill programs not included in the OBBBA. This is the third one-year extension of the farm bill; it originally expired on Sept. 30, 2023.

I find it frustrating that the Trump administration can find \$40 billion to send to the Argentine government, while delivering \$12 billion for U.S. crop farmers and failing to fund much-needed tax credits to help people afford their health insurance and fighting efforts to feed the hungry through SNAP, the nation's largest nutrition assistance program.

# Government relations

*continued from page 4*

people responsible for striking a final deal that can be supported by all caucuses are competing in the race for governor. Majority Leader Lisa Demuth, R-Cold Spring, is challenging Gov. Tim Walz.

## Support for farmers is critical

For MFU's part, we're working to ensure that lawmakers understand that too many farmers are facing financial strain and support from lawmakers is critical. At MFU's State Convention, delegates approved a Special Order of Business on 'Responding to the Crisis in Farm Country,' citing that requests for Farmer-Lender Mediation in our state had doubled from 2024 to 2025.

Since then, we've received new data showing that requests in November were triple that in the previous year.

In late fall, MFU President Gary Wertish sent a letter to Walz outlining some key opportunities to act early to provide some certainty to farmers, while acknowledging that action is needed on the federal level.

"Our members are under financial stress due to the ongoing trade war, depressed commodity prices, cancelled federal contracts, and increased prices for everything from inputs to healthcare," Wertish wrote, making the case for early action to extend Farmer-Lender Mediation and approve new funding for the Rural Finance Authority (RFA).

## Register for Lobby Day

Progress on these and all our priority issues will rely on individual members reaching out to their representatives. A great opportunity to help set the agenda for lawmakers and ensure they understand the needs of MFU members is to join for our annual Lobby Day Drive-in on Tuesday, March 3. Register at [bit.ly/MFULobby26](https://bit.ly/MFULobby26). Bring a friend or neighbor.

It's not only important, but it's also fun. That evening, we'll again host a reception at Farmers Kitchen and Bar—an informal opportunity to build relationships with lawmakers and fellow members. We hope you can join us. Find more details elsewhere in this issue and reach out to me with additional questions.

Coming to the Capitol for lobby day is also important because the make-up of the legislature is constantly changing. And that's certainly going to be true following the next election. Already, twenty-five lawmakers have announced their intentions to retire or seek another office in the coming year—a number that is sure to increase.

Senate Tax Chair Anne Rest, DFL-New Hope, will not seek reelection after the 2026 session. At convention, she shared with members her intention to see ag-related tax provisions through this session, including fully funding Minnesota's Beginning Farmer Tax Credit.

Senate Health and Human Services Chair and champion for MFU's work on healthcare, Melissa Wicklund, DFL-Bloomington, also announced her retirement as did Sen. Steve Drazkowski, R-Wabasha, who helped ensure that farmers on small acreages and flower farmers could benefit from the ag homestead tax credit.

## ACA subsidies

In the close of 2025—as this issue went to press—federal lawmakers continued wrangling over the future of tax credits for farmers and others who purchase health insurance on the individual market. These Affordable Care Act (ACA) tax credits are set to expire by the end of 2025 and will lead to sharply increased prices for many, including MFU members who've spoken up in recent weeks.

After the longest federal government shutdown in history, congressional Democrats have continued to push to extend the tax credits, even joining with four moderate Republicans to pass a discharge petition to force a vote on a three-year extension. A vote will happen in January and—though the same proposal has already failed to gain enough Republican votes in the Senate—I'm hopeful that by the time you're reading this, we have an extension and more certainty on healthcare costs.

National Farmers Union and other Farmers Union states have joined the fight to renew health care tax credits. Iowa Farmers Union President Aaron Lehman testified before a Senate Committee in December, discussing the impact of rising health costs on farm families.

"It is hugely important that Iowa farmers and rural residents reach out immediately to our members of Congress," Lehman said. "Too many in Washington live in a bubble. But in reality, the anticipated health care cost increases will cave in the budgets of farm families, and the damage will reverberate throughout our rural communities. We need to demand action now to extend support to keep health care prices affordable for ordinary Iowans."

## Grey wolf vote

Less reported, the House also voted to remove the grey wolf from the Endangered Species Act, a move that would return management to Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources (DNR). MFU staffer Peter Ripka served on the state committee charged with updating the DNR's plans.

In 2025, the Minnesota Department of Agriculture received \$197,000 in wolf claims, against an annual appropriation of \$175,000.

## COOL stalled

Going into the New Year, NFU is continuing to push for Mandatory Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) for beef, a subject reaffirmed in MFU's 2026 Special Orders coming out of convention. Consumers should know where their beef comes from and be able to make the choice to support U.S. producers. But just a handful of multinational companies control the beef packing industry and benefit from the ability to import, repackage and distribute beef raised abroad.

Reach out to your members of Congress and encourage their support of the American Beef Labeling Act (S. 421) and the Country-of-Origin Labeling Enforcement Act (H.R. 5818).

As always, this is just a snapshot of our legislative work. If you have questions, thoughts, ideas or concerns, contact me at (320) 232-3047 or [stu@mfu.org](mailto:stu@mfu.org).

**ATTENTION  
MEMBERS!**



Is your contact info up to date?  
Email changes to [operations@mfu.org](mailto:operations@mfu.org).



## FEBRUARY 1986

Leaders of Minnesota Farmers Union and the National Farmers Organization unveiled a joint livestock marketing plan to about 100 MFU and NFO members. The plan is expected to improve the competitive positions of the two organization's livestock producers as they work together to market their products through NFO's established marketing system.

The bidding period of the USDA's whole herd buyout program for dairy farmers officially began Feb. 10.

The 1985 Farm Financial Survey found that the financial condition of survey respondents deteriorated between Jan. 1, 1984, and Jan. 1, 1985. Respondents experienced a 16.8 percent drop in the value of their assets. Liabilities increased by 4.2 percent. This result was a 31.3 percent decrease in net equity.

## FEBRUARY 1946

For the world as a whole, a food crisis has developed which may prove to be the worst in modern times. More people face starvation and even actual death for want of food today than in any war year and perhaps more than in all the war years combined.

Enemies of Farmers Union Grain Terminal Association in the private grain business, too cowardly to show their hand in public, are having their lies peddled by publicity firms hired by the hideout grain firms. They are covering up their names in the hope that they can again fool the farmers.

Farmers in this country have never prospered except when the country as a whole was busy and the workers had paychecks to spend at the corner grocery store.

## FEBRUARY 2006

A documentary based on a Minnesota Farmers Union event was broadcast on public television. "Sustainable MN: Local



Five county presidents were re-elected to the MFU Executive Board at the State Board meeting on Jan. 21 in St. Cloud. Back row, from left, Larry Jacobson, Clay County; Dave Johnson, West Otter Tail; Merlyn Hubin, Cottonwood County; Markell Vogt, Aitkin County, and Eunice Biel, Fillmore County. State officers on the board are in the front row, from left: Vice President Dennis Sjodin, President Doug Peterson and Secretary Bessie Klose.

Cooks, Local Food," was based on the Minnesota Cooks event held at the state fair.

The Bush administration budget cuts \$5 billion from farm program spending. The cuts are part of a larger budget package that sets the goal of cutting the federal deficit in half by 2009. Agriculture makes up less than one half of one percent of the federal budget, but takes about 25 percent of the cuts in the administration proposal.

## Apple Cinnamon Rolls with Maple Brown Butter Icing

Recipe from Hanna Herfindahl-Quint, Dodge County



Share your recipe with other readers of Minnesota Agriculture. Send it to [janet@mfp.org](mailto:janet@mfp.org).

### Dough:

- 1 cup warm milk (110 degrees F)
- 2 1/4 teaspoons active dry yeast
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- 4 tablespoons salted butter, softened
- 3 large eggs
- 3 1/2 to 4 1/2 cups of flour
- 1/4 teaspoon salt

### Filling:

- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 cup white sugar
- 1 tablespoon cinnamon
- 6 tablespoons salted butter, very soft
- 2-3 apples, diced

### Maple Brown Butter Icing:

- 4 tablespoons salted butter, softened
- 6 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 1/4 cup maple syrup
- 2-3 cups powdered sugar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla

### Instructions:

In a large bowl, combine milk, yeast, brown sugar. Let sit for 5 to 10 minutes, until foamy.

Add eggs, 3 1/2 cups flour and salt.

Using dough hook or wooden spoon, mix until completely incorporated. If dough is still sticky, add additional flour. Cover bowl with towel and let sit for about an hour or until doubled in size.

## Member photos



Dakota County Farmers Union President and Executive Committee member Linda Larson shared this photo of her holiday baking.



Olmsted County Farmers Union members Michelle and Jon Hanenberger of Bear Country Meats talk about their business during a Dec. 7 event in Mantorville hosted by the Dodge and Olmsted County Farmers Unions.

Share your photos with [janet@mfu.org](mailto:janet@mfu.org) for inclusion in a future issue of Minnesota Agriculture.

Meanwhile, mix filling. In a bowl, combine sugar, cinnamon and brown sugar.

Punch dough down and roll out onto lightly floured surface, creating 12 inch by 18 inch rectangle.

Spread butter evenly over dough, then sprinkle on apples and cinnamon sugar.

Starting with long edge closest to you, tightly roll dough into a log.

Using a sharp, serrated knife, cut into 12 to 15 rolls. Place in greased 9 inch by 13 inch pan. Let rest for 20 to 30 minutes.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes. While baking, make icing.

Add butter to pot over medium heat, allowing it to brown. Mix together cream cheese, powdered sugar, syrup and vanilla, then add browned butter.

Spread warm icing over rolls and enjoy.



Members of the 2024 Farmers Union Enterprises Leadership (FUEL) cohort gathered in Montana. Applications for the 2026 program will be accepted through March 15.

## Farmers Union Enterprises Leadership program accepting applications

Applications are being accepted for the 2026 Farmers Union Enterprises Leadership (FUEL) program through March 15. FUEL is an intensive course designed to deepen participants' understanding of Farmers Union, cooperatives and agriculture. The program builds leadership skills and knowledge so participants can become stronger advocates in their communities and within Farmers Union.

FUEL empowers future leaders from across the states of Minnesota, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin. Apply at <https://bit.ly/FUEL2026Application>.

Tentative FUEL travel dates for the 2026-27 cohort:

- Mid-late July: Summer session in Redwood Falls, Minn.
- Early September: NFU Fall Legislative Fly-In, Washington, D.C.
- Nov. 20-22: MFU State Convention
- March 2027: NFU National Convention

Contact Lisa Holm at **763-607-4570** or Gail Donkers at **507-202-2042** if you're interested in learning more or have any questions.



## Membership application

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Spouse's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State: \_\_\_\_\_

County: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip code: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Home phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Cell phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Type of farm: *Check all that apply*

<input type="checkbox"/> Crops	<input type="checkbox"/> Organic
<input type="checkbox"/> Beef	<input type="checkbox"/> Poultry
<input type="checkbox"/> Dairy	<input type="checkbox"/> Sheep
<input type="checkbox"/> Hogs	<input type="checkbox"/> Vegetable or fruit
<input type="checkbox"/> Horses	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other please list: _____	

Membership: *Fee includes family unless student is checked.*

<input type="checkbox"/> New member	<input type="checkbox"/> 1 year - \$75
<input type="checkbox"/> Renewing member	<input type="checkbox"/> 3 years - \$200
<b>JOIN TODAY!</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Student - \$20	

Mail this card to:

**Minnesota Farmers Union**  
305 Roselawn Ave. E. #200  
St. Paul, MN 55117

Or sign up online: <https://www.mfu.org/join-renew-membership>



# You may be eligible for disaster assistance programs through the Farm Service Agency

**DAN MAHONEY**  
**DEPUTY STATE EXECUTIVE**  
**DIRECTOR, MN FSA**  
daniel.mahoney@mn.usda.gov

If you've suffered excessive livestock death losses and grazing or feed losses due to winter storms, you may be eligible for disaster assistance programs through the USDA Farm Service Agency (FSA).

The Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) offers payments for livestock death losses in excess of normal mortality due to adverse weather and the Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-Raised Fish Program (ELAP) provides emergency relief for losses due to feed or water shortages, disease, adverse weather, or other conditions, which are not adequately addressed by other disaster programs.

For disease losses under LIP, FSA county committees can accept veterinarian certifications that livestock deaths were directly related to adverse weather and unpreventable through good animal husbandry and management.

LIP also provides assistance to eligible livestock owners that must sell livestock at a reduced price because of an injury from an eligible loss condition

For livestock losses under LIP, producers must file a notice of loss and provide supporting documentation and an application for payment to the local FSA office. Applications should include proof of death documentation, copies of any grower's contracts, proof of normal mortality documentation, and livestock beginning inventory documentation.

For LIP, livestock records should include documentation of the number, kind, type and weight range of livestock. The beginning inventory should be supported by birth recordings or purchase receipts.

USDA has established LIP normal mortality rates for each type and weight range of



eligible livestock, i.e. adult beef cow equals 1.5 percent and non-adult beef cattle less than 400 pounds equals 5 percent. These established percentages reflect losses that are considered expected or typical under "normal" conditions.

LIP payments for owners are based on national payment rates that are 75 percent of the market value of the applicable livestock as determined by the USDA's Secretary of Agriculture. Rates for contract growers of poultry or swine will not exceed the rates for owners but are based on 75 percent of national average input costs for the applicable livestock.

Eligible livestock must have been maintained for commercial use for livestock sale as part of a farming operation on the day they died.

Eligible losses for ELAP include:

- For livestock, grazing losses not covered under the Livestock Forage Disaster Program (LFP), loss of purchased feed and/or mechanically harvested feed due to an eligible adverse weather event, additional cost of transporting water and feed because of an eligible drought and additional cost associated

with gathering livestock to treat for cattle tick fever.

- For honeybees, loss of purchased feed due to an eligible adverse weather event, cost of additional feed purchased above normal quantities due to an eligible adverse weather condition, colony losses in excess of normal mortality due to an eligible weather event or loss condition, including CCD, and hive losses due to eligible adverse weather.
- For farm-raised fish, death losses in excess of normal mortality and/or loss of purchased feed due to an eligible adverse weather event are eligible.

Producers must file a notice of loss and application for payment to the local FSA office by March 2, 2026, for losses incurred in 2025 that are eligible for payment through the Livestock Indemnity Program (LIP) and Emergency Assistance for Livestock, Honeybees, and Farm-raised Fish Program (ELAP).

For more information about livestock disaster programs, visit your USDA Service Center or [fsa.usda.gov](http://fsa.usda.gov).

# Ag Research Economist Samuel Porter joins MFU staff, offers insight on importance of research

I'm excited to introduce myself as a new staff member of the Minnesota Farmers Union. I joined MFU as an Agricultural Research Economist and had the pleasure of diving right in at state convention. It has been a privilege meeting staff and members, and to start plugging into the important work this organization is doing.

A bit about me - I previously worked at the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), focusing on conservation payment schedules, climate resiliency programs, and remote sensing for cover crop monitoring. My career path has taken me from vegetable farming in Minnesota and Massachusetts to international agricultural development. I served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Malawi, supporting agricultural extension, and later at the International Potato Center strengthening climate-resilient sweet potato seed systems. I hold a bachelor's degree in sustainable international development from Brandeis University



Samuel Porter

and a master's in applied economics from Cornell University. I live in Minneapolis with my wife and two young children, and enjoy playing bluegrass music, gardening and exploring the outdoors.

## Research cuts will have consequences

I do not see agricultural extension and research as a luxury, but as a necessity. The vacuum created by recent cuts to USDA programs will have lasting consequences for our food systems, rural economies and agricultural resilience.

By March 2025, USDA had lost more than 15,000 employees through voluntary resignations. The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) alone has 1,600 fewer employees, nearly 20 percent of its workforce, reducing capacity to conduct inspections and safeguard against the spread of animal and plant diseases. Equally troubling, 34 percent of National Agricultural Statistic Service and 29 percent of Economic Research Service staff have left, undermining the nation's ability to provide reliable agricultural data and economic research.

The impacts are already visible. The ability of Farm Service Agency and NRCS offices to process applications and deliver essential services has been severely hindered. Inspectors at APHIS and other agencies face backlogs. Imports and exports get delayed, farm bill programs stall, and critical support fails to reach producers when it is most needed. Growth in agricultural productivity has already slowed, and without major public investment, productivity gains will falter further, leaving us less able to offset the impacts of climate change.

Our agricultural sector depends on strong research, robust safety measures and effective government programs. The USDA cuts foremost need to be rallied against. But the private sector—companies, NGOs, and research institutions—must step forward in this time to ensure innovation continues and the vacuum in agricultural research and support does not widen.

Agriculture is the backbone of our rural economy and food security. Protecting it requires collective action, sustained investment and a renewed commitment to research and extension.



## NFU Convention is March 7-9

The 124th Anniversary National Farmers Union Convention is March 7-9 at the Hilton New Orleans Riverside in New Orleans.

Conference registration opens on Saturday, March 7 with the opening session at 9 a.m. There will be various breakout sessions in the afternoon and an evening banquet.

The conference reconvenes on Sunday, March 8 with a 10 a.m. to noon general

session followed by policy consideration beginning at 1:30 p.m. The NFU PAC Happy Hour begins at 5:30 p.m.

The full day of Monday, March 9 is devoted to policy consideration, with the session starting at 8 a.m. and slated to last until 5 p.m.

Learn more about the convention at <https://nfu.org/events-programs/2026-convention/>.

## Calendar of events

**Feb. 16**  
MFU office closed for President's Day

**Feb. 19** – 1 p.m.  
Deer Management Meeting, Plainview American Legion

**Feb. 21**  
Full board meeting, MFU state office, St. Paul

**March 3**  
Lobby Day, MFU state office, St. Paul

**March 3**  
Lobby Day reception, Farmers Kitchen + Bar, Minneapolis

**March 7-9**  
NFU Convention, New Orleans

Find the latest news online at [mfp.org/events](https://mfp.org/events)



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<b>Elk River</b>	Todd Ostrow (Health Specialist)
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<b>Luverne</b>	Barb Anderson
<b>Maple Grove</b>	Brandon Hummel
<b>Marshall</b>	Dennis Klocow, Jr.
<b>Marshall</b>	Mike Panka
<b>Menahga</b>	Kristine Hendrickson
<b>Montevideo</b>	Ivan Anderson
<b>Moorhead</b>	Mari Berggren (Health Specialist)
<b>Moorhead</b>	Aaron Schenck
<b>Moorhead</b>	Robin Swanson & Jenna Crabtree
<b>Morris</b>	Debbie Anderson
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